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APPLICATION FOR UNITED STATES PATENT

for

BIOSENSOR UTILIZING A RESONATOR HAVING
A FUNCTIONALIZED SURFACE

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BIOSENSOR UTILIZING A RESONATOR HAVING A FUNCTIONALIZED SURFACE

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0001] The invention relates generally to biosensors, and more particularly to biosensors that incorporate resonators having functionalized surfaces for binding or otherwise reacting with target biomolecules in a manner that changes the frequency responses of the resonators.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

[0002] Biosensors are used to detect the presence and/or levels of biomolecules, typically in a fluid sample. For instance, biosensors may be used to determine the levels of particular chemicals in biological fluids, such as blood. Specific sensors can therefore be used to determine the levels of glucose, potassium, calcium, carbon dioxide, and other substances in blood samples.

[0003] Biosensors such as these often use an electrochemical system to detect a particular substance of interest. The electrochemical system includes substances such as enzymes and redox mediators to react with the substance of interest (the target substance) and to thereby produce ions that can carry a current. A set of electrodes are used to generate an electrical potential that attracts the ions to the electrodes, creating a circuit that can be used to measure the resulting current.

[0004] In one type of system, a biosensor includes an enzyme which is immobilized by a membrane. The target substance in a fluid sample migrates through the membrane and reacts with the enzyme. This forms ions within the fluid sample. These ions then migrate through the fluid sample to the system's electrodes. The migration of the ions to the electrodes generates an electrical current that is measured. Because the current depends upon the concentration of the target substance in the sample, the measured current is then translated to a concentration of the target substance.

[0005] There are a number of problems with these conventional biosensors. For example, they are relatively slow. This is, at least in part, a result of the fact that it is necessary in electrochemical biosensors to allow a certain amount of time to pass before the current resulting from the ionization of the target substance in the sample is established. Only after this current is allowed to establish itself can it be measured to provide a reasonably accurate estimate of the concentration of the target substance.

[0006] Even after the current resulting from the ionization of the target substance is established and measured, the resulting estimation of the target substance concentration typically is not as accurate as would be desirable. This is a result, at least in part, of the fact that the sample being tested typically contains various other substances, some of which may interfere in the process. For instance, some of these other substances may ionize in the sample and thereby increase the measured current, leading to an overestimation of the target substance concentration. Alternatively, some chemicals may react with the ions of the target substance, thereby reducing the measured current and causing an underestimation of the target substance concentration.

[0007] It would therefore be desirable to provide systems and methods that enable the testing of samples to determine the presence of target substances more quickly and more accurately than is typically possible using prior art systems and methods.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0008] Other objects and advantages of the invention may become apparent upon reading the following detailed description and upon reference to the accompanying drawings.

[0009] FIGURE 1 is a diagram illustrating the structure of an exemplary resonator in accordance with one embodiment.

[0010] FIGURE 2 is a functional block diagram illustrating a biosensor system in accordance with one embodiment.

[0011] FIGURES 3A-3C are a set of diagrams illustrating the binding of target molecules to the functionalized surface of a biosensor in accordance with one embodiment.

[0012] FIGURE 4 is a flow diagram illustrating a method for detecting the presence of target molecules in a sample in accordance with one embodiment.

[0013] FIGURE 5 is a flow diagram illustrating a method for detecting the presence of target molecules in a sample in accordance with an alternative embodiment.

[0014] While the invention is subject to various modifications and alternative forms, specific embodiments thereof are shown by way of example in the drawings and the accompanying detailed description. It should be understood, however, that the drawings and detailed description are not intended to limit the invention to the particular embodiments which are described. This disclosure is instead intended to cover all modifications, equivalents and alternatives falling within the scope of the present invention as defined by the appended claims.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0015] One or more of the problems outlined above may be solved by the various embodiments of the invention. Broadly speaking, the invention comprises systems and methods for detecting the presence of molecules (e.g., biomolecules) in a sample using sensors that incorporate resonators which have functionalized surfaces for binding or otherwise reacting with target molecules in a manner that changes the frequency responses of the resonators.

[0016] In one embodiment of the invention, a device includes a resonator, where the resonator has at least one functionalized surface which is configured to react with target molecules. The reaction of the target molecules with the functionalized surface causes changes in the mass and/or charge of the resonator, stress/strain, surface energy/tension and the like, which cause changes in the vibrational characteristics of the resonator. Changes in the vibrational characteristics of the resonator may be manifested through corresponding changes in electrical characteristics of the resonator.

[0017] In one embodiment, the resonator consists of a layer of piezoelectric material and a pair of electrodes that are coupled to opposite sides of the layer of piezoelectric material. One of the electrodes forms the functionalized surface of the resonator. When an excitation signal is applied across the electrodes, the frequency response of the resonator can be determined. When target biomolecules come into contact with the functionalized surface, the target biomolecules react (e.g., bind) with the functionalized surface and cause changes in the mass and/or electrostatic charge of the resonator. By determining the frequency responses of the resonator before and after exposure to a sample that may contain target biomolecules, changes in the frequency response correlated to the changed mass and/or electrostatic charge can be determined, indicating the detection of the target biomolecules.

[0018] In one embodiment, a pair of resonators is used. Each of the resonators is essentially as described above, except that one of the resonators has a functionalized surface and the other does not. The resonator that does not have a functionalized surface is used as a control against which the other resonator can be compared. Thus, when both resonators are exposed to a sample, any

target biomolecules will affect the frequency response of the functionalized-surface resonator, but not the resonator without the functionalized surface. Any non-target molecules will equally affect both resonators and the corresponding frequency responses, so a comparison of the two resonators will effectively cancel out any effects resulting from non-target molecules.

[0019] In one embodiment of the invention, a method includes the steps of providing a resonator having a surface functionalized with a type of biomolecules, where the presence of target molecules causes the biomolecules of the functionalized surface to change the frequency response of the resonator, exposing the functionalized surface of the resonator to a test fluid, determining a frequency response of the resonator after the functionalized surface has been exposed to the test fluid, and determining whether the test fluid contains target molecules based upon the frequency response of the resonator.

[0020] In one embodiment, the method includes the additional steps of providing a second resonator that does not have a functionalized surface, exposing the second resonator to the test fluid, determining a frequency response of the second resonator after the second resonator has been exposed to the test fluid, and comparing the frequency response of the second resonator to the frequency response of the first (functionalized) resonator to determine the effect of target molecules on the frequency response of the first resonator.

[0021] Numerous additional embodiments are also possible.

[0022] One or more embodiments of the invention are described below. It should be noted that these and any other embodiments described below are exemplary and are intended to be illustrative of the invention rather than limiting.

[0023] As described herein, various embodiments of the invention comprise systems and methods for detecting the presence of molecules in a sample using sensors that incorporate resonators which have functionalized surfaces for binding or otherwise reacting with target molecules in a manner that changes the frequency responses of the resonators.

[0024] In one embodiment, a biosensor includes a piezoelectric resonator that has a surface which is functionalized to react with target biomolecules. The resonator consists in one embodiment of a layer of piezoelectric material that has a pair of electrodes that are coupled to

opposite sides of the layer of piezoelectric material. One of the electrodes forms the functionalized surface of the resonator. When an excitation signal is applied across the electrodes, the frequency response of the resonator can be determined. When target biomolecules come into contact with the functionalized surface, the target biomolecules react (e.g., bind) with the functionalized surface and cause changes in the mass and/or electrostatic charge of the resonator. By determining the frequency responses of the resonator before and after exposure to a sample that may contain target biomolecules, changes in the frequency response correlated to the changed mass and/or electrostatic charge can be determined, indicating the detection of the target biomolecules.

[0025] In one embodiment, a pair of resonators is used. Each of the resonators is essentially as described above, except that one of the resonators has a functionalized surface and the other does not. The resonator that does not have a functionalized surface is used as a control against which the other resonator can be compared. Thus, when both resonators are exposed to a sample, any target biomolecules will affect the frequency response of the functionalized-surface resonator, but not the resonator without the functionalized surface. Any non-target molecules will equally affect both resonators and the corresponding frequency responses, so a comparison of the two resonators will effectively cancel out any effects resulting from non-target molecules.

[0026] Referring to FIGURE 1, a diagram illustrating the structure of an exemplary resonator in accordance with one embodiment is shown. The resonator illustrated in this figure comprises a film bulk acoustic resonator (FBAR) device. Device 100 includes a layer of piezoelectric material 110 sandwiched between electrodes 121 and 122 to form a resonator component. This resonator component is positioned with its edges on a silicon/silicon dioxide substrate 130 (a layer of silicon dioxide 131 deposited on a layer of silicon 132) in order to allow the resonator component to vibrate. The exposed surface of electrode 121 is functionalized with a layer 140 of biologically active or derivatized material. The biologically active or derivatized material interacts with the target biomolecules by, for example, binding the biomolecules to layer 140 and thereby changing the mass or electrostatic charge of this layer and, consequently, the resonator component.

[0027] The FBAR resonator may be constructed using techniques that are known to persons of skill in the art. For example, in one embodiment, a FBAR resonator may be constructed according to the following process.

[0028] First, a substrate is provided. In one embodiment, a silicon wafer is used as the substrate, although other substrate materials used in semiconductor processing (e.g., gallium arsenide) can also be used. A layer of sacrificial material is then deposited on the substrate. The sacrificial layer may consist of a variety of materials, such as Al, Cu, NiFe, ZnO, or other suitable materials that are known in the art. The sacrificial layer may be deposited using any suitable process, such as sputtering or vapor deposition.

[0029] A photoresist layer is then formed on top of the sacrificial layer. A pattern is then formed in the photoresist using conventional methods. The patterned photoresist forms a mask which is used to selectively etch the sacrificial layer. More specifically, the photoresist mask covers an area of the sacrificial layer that will later form an air gap beneath the piezoelectric resonator component. After the sacrificial layer is etched, an insulator layer is deposited on the substrate, effectively replacing the sacrificial layer that was previously etched away. The insulator layer can be deposited or otherwise formed using conventional means.

[0030] After the insulator layer is deposited, the photoresist is removed using, for example, a lift-off process. The portion of the insulator layer that is on top of the photoresist is also removed. This results in a patterned layer of insulator and sacrificial materials on top of the substrate. In other words, the sacrificial material is inset within the insulator material (or vice versa) to form a pattern within this layer. This layer will form the supporting structure for the resonator component after the sacrificial material is removed in a later step.

[0031] A membrane layer may optionally be formed on top of the patterned insulator/sacrificial layer. References below to formation of structures on top of the layer of insulator/sacrificial material should be construed as formation of the structures on the membrane layer if the membrane layer is used.

[0032] A conductive layer is then formed on the layer of insulator/sacrificial material. This conductive layer may consist of any conductive material such as a metal. Suitable metals may

include Al, Au, W, Pt or Mo. This conductive layer is patterned to form a lower electrode of the resonator component. A layer of piezoelectric material, such as AlN or ZnO, is then formed on top of the conductive layer. This piezoelectric layer is patterned to form the body of the piezoelectric resonator. A second conductive layer is then formed on top of the piezoelectric layer. This conductive layer is patterned to form the upper electrode of the resonator component. After the resonator component is formed in this manner, the sacrificial material on the substrate below the resonator component is removed using, for example, a wet etch process (it may be necessary to form a via to the sacrificial layer in order to effect the removal of this material).

[0033] The upper electrode of the resonator component has a lower side which is bound to the piezoelectric layer and an upper side which is exposed. This exposed to surface is then functionalized so that it will react (e.g., bound) with target molecules. In one embodiment, the electric surface is functionalized with antibody or DNA molecules. This may be accomplished by forming self-assembling monolayers of various thiols or sulfides on the electrode surface using a chemisorption process. The antibody or DNA molecules can then be covalently linked to the self-assembled monolayer using an activation process.

[0034] Various alternative means for functionalizing the surface of the resonator are also possible. For example, the functionalization of the FBAR device may be achieved by immobilization of biomolecules on an organic membrane that is pre-coated on the surface of the device, or chemically derivatized such as silylation, esterification, alkylation, or similar processes that are known in the art. The functionalization of the FBAR device may also be achieved by direct immobilization of biomolecules on a metal or other inorganic film on the surface of the device, or self-assembled biomolecular layers such as amino acid-derivatized fatty acids/lipids on the surface of the device.

[0035] Because the biosensor may be used in a "wet" environment, it may be necessary to protect portions of the biosensor other than the exposed resonator surfaces. In other words, the sample which is being tested to determine the presence of the target biomolecules may be a liquid sample. For some of the components of the biosensor, exposure to a liquid sample may cause problems that could prevent proper operation of the biosensor. For example, the liquid sample could cause a short circuit between the electrodes of the resonator component, thereby

preventing measurement of changes in the frequency response of the resonator. Some embodiments of the invention may therefore also include a protective layer that covers the components of the biosensor, except for the functionalized surface of the resonator component (and possibly the non-functionalized electrode surface of a corresponding control biosensor). This protective layer may be provided by forming a polymer membrane over the components that require protection.

[0036] It should be noted that the foregoing description pertains to a single, exemplary embodiment. Alternative embodiments may be formed using slightly different steps in the described process. A number of these variations are included in the description of the foregoing process, and additional such variations will be apparent to those of skill in the art upon reading the present disclosure. For example, in one alternative embodiment, the exposed electrode surface of the resonator component may be functionalized by coating the surface with an ion-selective membrane. The ion-selective membrane can then be functionalized with enzymes such as glucose oxidase. Alternatively, the ion-selective membrane can be functionalized with a functional membrane that provides transport mechanisms such as carrier molecules, ion pores or channels extracted from biological materials or synthetic biochemicals.

[0037] As noted above, the FBAR biosensor described herein is used by detecting changes in the frequency response of the resonator that result from the exposure of the biosensor to a sample and subsequent reaction of the functionalized surface with the target molecules. In order to determine the frequency response of the resonator, control circuitry is provided. An exemplary embodiment of a system including an FBAR biosensor and corresponding control electronics is shown in FIGURE 2.

[0038] Referring to FIGURE 2, a functional block diagram illustrating a biosensor system in accordance with one embodiment is shown. In this embodiment, system 200 includes a resonator 210 and control circuitry 220. In one embodiment, resonator 210 is as described above. Resonator 210 is coupled to control circuitry 220 by the electrodes of the resonator. The electrodes are coupled to signal generation circuitry 221 and processing circuitry 222 components of control circuitry 220.

[0039] Signal generator circuitry 221 is configured to produce an excitation signal that is applied to the electrodes of resonator 210. The excitation signal has an AC (alternating current) component that causes the piezoelectric material of the resonator to vibrate. Because of the physical characteristics of resonator 210, the resonator has a characteristic frequency response. The frequency response of resonator 210 manifests itself in the variability of the electrical characteristics of the resonator (e.g., the impedance of the resonator). These electrical characteristics can be measured by processing circuitry 222.

[0040] The frequency response of resonator 210 has a fundamental resonance at a frequency at which the corresponding wavelength is twice the thickness of the resonator. The wavelength is equal to the acoustic velocity of the piezoelectric material, divided by the frequency. The acoustic velocity of the piezoelectric material depends upon the specific material that is used. For instance, AlN has an acoustic velocity of about 10,400 meters per second, while ZnO has an acoustic velocity of about 6,330 meters per second. Thus, for a resonator using AlN, if the thickness of the resonator is about 2.5 micrometers, the resonant frequency is about 2 GHz. If it is desired to adjust the resonant frequency to a different frequency, this can be achieved by, for example, changing the piezoelectric material or changing the thickness of the resonator.

[0041] It should be noted that, because the technology used in the manufacturing of FBAR devices is compatible with both Si and GaAs wafer processing techniques, it is possible to combine these technologies to make all-in-one biosensors. In other words, it is possible to manufacture both the resonator and the control circuitry on a single chip. This may provide additional advantages over the prior art in terms of simplification of the design of the respective components of the biosensors, improved power efficiency, and so on.

[0042] Thus, in one embodiment, biosensor system 200 operates by generating an excitation signal that includes a plurality of frequencies (not necessarily at the same time), applying this excitation signal to resonator 210 and then measuring the electrical characteristics of the resonator corresponding to each of the frequencies. For example, signal generator circuitry 221 may generate an excitation signal that includes a single frequency which varies as a function of time. In other words, signal generator circuitry 221 scans through a range of frequencies. Processing circuitry 222 may then measure, for example, the impedance across resonator 210 as

a function of frequency (which is a function of time). This frequency response (i.e., the impedance of resonator 210 as a function of frequency) may be digitized, stored and compared to a baseline response, or it may be compared to the response of a control resonator, which would be operated in the same manner.

[0043] It should be noted that the excitation signal applied to the resonator may include various components (e.g., single or mixed frequencies, or time-variant components). Similarly, the frequency response may be measured in terms of various response components (e.g., in-phase and out-of-phase components) or other response characteristics. Such response characteristics may include the steady-state frequency shifts of the resonators due to changes of mass or electrostatic charge resulting from the specific binding of the target molecules with the immobilized biomolecules on the resonators' surfaces (e.g., antibody-antigen, DNA hybridization, molecular receptor binding, molecular configurational changes).

[0044] The biosensor is useful in the detection of target molecules because, in reacting with the functionalized surface of the resonator, the target molecules change the mass and/or electrostatic charge of the resonator, both of which affect the resonance of the resonator. In other words, these characteristics change the vibrational characteristics of the resonator. For example, if the target molecules bind with the functionalized surface and thereby effectively increase the mass of the resonator, the resonator will tend to respond less quickly to the forces generated by the applied excitation signal. The resonant frequency will therefore be lower. Thus, if, prior to the binding of target molecules to the functionalized surface, a resonator resonates at a frequency f , the additional mass of the target molecules that are bound to the functionalized surface will cause the resonator to resonate at a frequency $f - \Delta f$. If the frequency response of the resonator is viewed as a function of frequency, this corresponds to a shift of the peak response to the left (the lower frequencies).

[0045] Referring to FIGURES 3A-3C, a set of diagrams illustrating the binding of target molecules to the functionalized surface of a biosensor in accordance with one embodiment shown. Referring first to FIGURE 3A, a diagram illustrating a biosensor prior to exposure to a sample is shown. The biosensor has essentially the same structure shown in FIGURE 1, including a support structure formed by substrate 331 and insulator layer 332, and a resonator

component formed by piezoelectric layer 310 sandwiched between electrodes 321 and 322. Electrode 322 of the resonator component is functionalized by antibodies 340, which can be bound to the electrode, for example, by a self-assembling monolayer of a thiol. A protective polymer layer 350 (not shown in FIGURE 1) covers the resonator component and support structure, except for the functionalized surface of the resonator component.

[0046] Referring next to FIGURE 3B, a diagram illustrating the biosensor of FIGURE 3A during exposure to a sample is shown. As depicted in this figure, sample 360 contains a variety of different biomolecules, including antigen molecules (target molecules, represented in the figure by triangles) and various other molecules (non-target molecules, represented in the figure by circles and squares). The biomolecules are distributed throughout sample 360, so that some of the biomolecules come into contact with the functionalized surface of the biosensor. As the biomolecules come into contact with the functionalized surface, they may or may not become bound to the functionalized surface. More specifically, if a biomolecule that comes into contact with the functionalized surface is an antigen corresponding to the antibodies of the functionalized surface, it will be bound to one of the antibodies. If the biomolecule is not the specific antigen corresponding to the antibodies, it will not be bound to the antibodies of the functionalized surface.

[0047] Referring next to FIGURE 3C, a diagram illustrating the biosensor of FIGURES 3A and 3B after the sample is removed is shown. It can be seen from this figure that, when the sample (e.g., a biological fluid) is removed from the biosensor, the non-antigen biomolecules contained in the sample are also removed. The antigen biomolecules bound to the antibodies remain. These antigens affect the mass and/or electrostatic charge of the resonator component and will therefore change the frequency response of the resonator component. Thus, the presence of the antigen biomolecules is detected by determining whether the frequency response of the resonator component has changed. This is accomplished as described above.

[0048] It should be noted that, in some cases, removal of the sample from the biosensor may not ensure that all of the non-target biomolecules have been removed from the functionalized surface of the resonator component. These non-target molecules may affect the frequency response of the resonator component and consequently affect the determination of whether target molecules

were present in the sample. In one embodiment, the effect of these non-target molecules is compensated for through the use of a control biosensor in addition to the test biosensor. The control biosensor is essentially identical to the test biosensor, except that the surface of the resonator component is not functionalized to react with the target biomolecules. When the sample is tested, both the test biosensor and control biosensor are exposed to the sample. Any non-target molecules that are not removed from the test biosensor should likewise not be removed from the control biosensor. Because the control biosensor does not bind the target biomolecules, any change in the frequency response of the resonator component of the control biosensor should be due to the presence of these non-target biomolecules. Since the effect of the non-target biomolecules is known from the frequency response of the control biosensor, this effect can effectively be "subtracted out" of the changes in the frequency response of the test biosensor.

[0049] It should be noted that, while the foregoing example describes the use of two biosensors (a test biosensor and a control biosensor), the two biosensors may be considered either separate units, or parts of the same biosensor. The two biosensors may each have their own control circuitry, or they may share all or part of the control circuitry. In the latter instance, the example may be more easily understood if the term "biosensor" is replaced with the term "resonator." Both instances are within the scope of the invention.

[0050] Referring to FIGURE 4, a flow diagram illustrating a method for detecting the presence of target molecules in a sample in accordance with one embodiment is shown. In this embodiment, a biosensor having a single resonator is used. The resonator has a functionalized surface that will react with target molecules in a sample. The method of this embodiment includes the steps of providing a resonator having a functionalized surface (block 410), determining the frequency response of the resonator prior to exposure to a sample (block 420), exposing the resonator to the sample (block 430), determining the frequency response of the resonator following exposure to the sample (block 440), comparing the frequency responses of the resonator prior to and following exposure to the sample (block 450), and determining the presence of target molecules based upon changes in the frequency response of the resonator resulting from exposure to the sample (block 460).

[0051] A single resonator is employed in this method, and it is necessary to provide a baseline frequency response from which changes in the frequency response can be determined. This baseline is provided in one embodiment by determining the frequency response of the resonator prior to exposure to the sample. In an alternative embodiment, the baseline may be provided by testing a plurality of resonators that are identically manufactured and establishing a composite frequency response, or an average frequency response for resonators having an identical design. In such embodiment, the composite or average frequency response can be stored in a memory coupled to the processing circuitry so that it can be retrieved and compared to the measured frequency response of the resonator after exposure to the sample. Various other means for providing the baseline are also possible.

[0052] Referring to FIGURE 5, a flow diagram illustrating a method for detecting the presence of target molecules in a sample in accordance with an alternative embodiment is shown. In this embodiment, a biosensor having a pair of resonators is used. One of the resonators functions as a test resonator, while the other functions as a control resonator. As described above, the test resonator has a functionalized surface, while the control resonator does not. The signal generation circuitry and processing circuitry for determining the frequency response of each of these resonators may be common. That is, a single set of signal generation and processing circuitry can be used in conjunction with both of the resonators. Alternatively, each resonator may have separate signal generation and processing circuitry.

[0053] This alternative method includes the steps of providing a biosensor having dual (test and control) resonators (block 510), exposing the resonator to the sample (block 520), determining the frequency response of the test resonator and the control resonator following exposure to the sample (block 530), comparing the frequency responses of the test resonator and control resonator (block 54), and determining the presence of target molecules based upon differences in the frequency responses of the test resonator and control resonator (block 550).

[0054] While this alternative method determines the presence of target molecules based upon differences between the frequency response of a test resonator and the frequency response of a control resonator, it may also be useful to be able to compare either or both of these frequency responses to a baseline response. For instance, even though the resonators may be identically

designed (except for non-functionalized surface of the control resonator), the change in frequency response due to the presence of target molecules may not be linear. Therefore, it may be helpful to know not only the magnitude of the difference between the test and control frequency responses, but also the magnitude of the frequency response changes resulting from non target molecules (i.e., the difference between a baseline, pre-sample-exposure frequency response and the control frequency response).

[0055] As noted above, the various embodiments of the present invention may provide a number of advantages over the prior art. These advantages may include greater sensitivity and faster response time than other types of biosensors, higher resonance frequencies that may provide higher sensitivity to changes in mass or in stiffness (resulting from changes in charge), simpler structures than other types of resonators (e.g., single-crystal quartz microbalance or SAW resonators), better power handling characteristics at high frequencies, sharper response peaks (due to reduced parasitic effects, larger surface areas for detection of target molecules, and the ability to perform detection of target molecules during or after exposure to wet environments. Another advantage of some of the embodiments of the present invention is that they may make use of relatively mature technologies (e.g., relating to methods for designing and manufacturing FBAR devices and integrated circuits, or functionalizing various surfaces) and may therefore present fewer difficulties in the design, practice and/or manufacture of the respective embodiments.

[0056] The benefits and advantages which may be provided by the present invention have been described above with regard to specific embodiments. These benefits and advantages, and any elements or limitations that may cause them to occur or to become more pronounced are not to be construed as critical, required, or essential features of any or all of the claims. As used herein, the terms "comprises," "comprising," or any other variations thereof, are intended to be interpreted as non-exclusively including the elements or limitations which follow those terms. Accordingly, a system, method, or other embodiment that comprises a set of elements is not limited to only those elements, and may include other elements not expressly listed or inherent to the claimed embodiment.

[0057] While the present invention has been described with reference to particular embodiments, it should be understood that the embodiments are illustrative and that the scope of the invention is not limited to these embodiments. Many variations, modifications, additions and improvements to the embodiments described above are possible. It is contemplated that these variations, modifications, additions and improvements fall within the scope of the invention as detailed within the following claims.